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MORAL SENSE

à propos de "l'affaire Dreyfuss"

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MORAL SENSE

One of the moments in school and college life peculiarly fraught with keen pleasure to us all, partly because of its fleeting nature, its expectancy, and the vividness of the emotions felt in the presence of many we have long desired to meet, is that of the first re-union after the long vacation. We are perhaps, mentally, morally, and physically, in better condition to cope with what is before us than at any other moment of the year, and our confidence and consequent self-satisfaction are at high-water mark. Here then, with a view of living up to these momentarily satisfying convictions, and with an eye on what is before us, it is perfectly timely and safe to take a retrospect, just to see where we are and to make sure that we are not only not, let us say, standing still—not to suggest aught else—but that we are continually progressing.

In order to obtain a true estimate of ourselves it is quite natural, by making a conscientious use of our experience gained by observation, reading and traveling, to compare our condition with that of nations representing what, at all events, has been universally considered the most advanced state of civilization. That such comparisons, so easily at hand in these days of electricity and rapid transit, should be continually repeated in all manner of forms, particularly in the daily press and the popular magazines, is only to be expected; and the results—representing probably as

unbiased intelligent views as in the nature of the case is possible,—judging with the light given us, can hardly be considered unfavorable to ourselves. What is at once obvious to the most casual observer, is the resemblance among the Anglo-Saxons in views, manners and customs, and the contrast in those respects to the Romance nations; and whatever may be our opinion in regard to our own comparative position, the fact is continually brought out that the Anglo-Saxons are in the van of modern civilization. That this view does not wholly emanate from themselves, the title of a work by an eminent educationist in France, "A quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons." now in its fourteenth edition, may serve as an indication. Believing this superiority to be a real one, it is highly interesting to know to what it is due.

The topics constituting what today goes to make up a liberal education, are drawn from language and literature, mathematics, science and history. The history of some nations is the world's history; this may be said in a great measure to be true of France for the past three centuries; for, surely, the civilized world has been to a certain extent affected by the role of Louis XIV, in the seventeenth century, by the influence of Voltaire in the eighteenth, and most assuredly, by Napoleon in the nineteenth. No man ever left the mark of the lion's claw upon humanity and its institutions more plainly than did Napoleon I. and it is still there. His system, in a word, was centralization of power rendering the individual a mere automaton, whose sole duty is obedience to the central authority. From his day, three institutions have come down in nearly all their pristine vigor, the university, the magistracy and the army. The first of these institutions has been very recently — and most advantageously — reorganized. The two last are vigorous examples of what they were when originally established, and of their demoralizing and fatal

influence an example has just been given, as startling as it is unparalleled in the annals of the Christian world in this century. Such is the result of blind obedience, of following the leader, and of suppression of the individual.

Now if the course of events has been even only cursorily observed during the same period in England and America, it must nevertheless be obvious that the policy — particularly in this last half of the century — has been in quite a degree just the reverse; that is to say, that in education, the law, and the army, the aim has ever been against centralization and in favor of the individual; and today this same idea is rapidly gaining ground in education through the elective system, tending to bring out the aptitude of the individual; in the law through trial by jury, considering the prisoner innocent until proof of his guilt is adduced, — that is favoring the individual; and in the army and civil service of the government by a system, to be sure far from adequate and complete in perfection, yet tending strongly against nepotism.

In regard to the first system, that of centralization; in proportion as the head of that system is untrue to itself, in a corresponding ratio will all the parts be affected. Stupendous as were the intellectual powers of Napoleon I. as shown in his works, he cannot be given equal credit for moral sense, judging likewise by his acts. The mock trial of the duke d'Enghien and the false proclamations to the French people after defeat are concrete examples of his misuse of this sense. The wilful distortion of the truth, whether by proclamation as in those days, or in newspaper reports to the Madrid government or our own of events which have occurred in the Philippine Islands in our own days, is an odious form of dishonesty, presupposing a want of intelligence on the reading constituency, and of course likely sooner or later, to act as a boomerang upon its originators. To the present day,

the falsity of this system, which suppresses independence of thought and action of the individual in favor of blind obedience to the central power, is making its baneful influence felt, and in a way, too, that cannot be forgotten by the civilized world. In all the realm of human experience, nothing can be more destructive to the well-being of the state or the individual than perversion of moral sense, and it is largely to the better maintenance of this cardinal virtue among the Anglo-Saxons than among the Romance nations, that the former owe today their superiority over the latter. While this is true taken broadly, it cannot be denied that lack of this sense is unfortunately only too conspicuous among the Anglo-Saxons. When the plea is made that it is far better to return such a verdict as was given at Rennes for humanitarian reasons than to satisfy the claims of justice, no better example of this truth can well be shown. That this, however, is not the sentiment of the Christian world, the deluge of conviction against it from the four quarters of the earth has emphasized in no uncertain way; and the echo is still ringing in the sense of the unwritten law, that even though the very skies had fallen, it were better that justice and truth should have had their way. Moral sense is a most delicate and lovely flower, but to grow it in anything like perfection, it needs constant cultivation. Intelligence is needed to discern the right, and courage often times to do it. Deprived of this sense, there is, if there be many roads, but one general direction for either the individual or the nation, and that the downward. It is useless to endeavor to cope successfully with those who possess this sense, for resting as it does on intelligence, the struggle is between understanding and lack of it, and the result must be a foregone conclusion.

Several years ago there was a great deal of complaint in Cambridge in regard to the loss of signs over shop

doors, upon the cars and elsewhere. Upon investigation it was shown that the disappearance was due to what is known in student parlance as "ragging" signs. It became necessary for the faculty to adopt stringent measures, which they did by correctly interpreting this expression and spelling its congener; s-t-e-a-l-i-n-g, and then allowing the law to take its course. Such cases, however, immediately after this "interpretation," failed to occur. Moral sense, that sensitive plant, had been appealed to, and it was its effect that gave the law no chance to act.

In school, some of us old boys — perhaps not all — can well remember our natural repugnance to seeking unlawful information surreptitiously during examination time; yet when this information was sought of us and possibly given, in this latter case, our refined moral sense felt less ruffled. It is an open secret, too, among ourselves, that one who would absolutely refuse to cheat on an examination, might, if pressed for time, hand in as his own his neighbor's problems, sentences or matter which he had not found time to work out, and the qualms of conscience were not supposed to be particularly vigorous.

It must be obvious that neglect to discern these quasi subtle distinctions is simply due to allowing the moral sense to become blunted. The possible combination of evils resulting from such perversion seems well nigh to have been attained in the course of the Rennes trial, where the most flagrant dishonesty kept revealing itself, and, too, in its most odious form, that of the lie. This once proven, society has no further use for the culprit and his claim to the title and companionship of a gentleman is gone. The climax was reached in the verdict, where expediency supplanted justice, where in a word, moral sense was completely lost.

In an address delivered at Chautauqua, in August, 1896, by President Eliot, on "Five American Contribu-

tions to Civilization," the following were pointed out and explained: 1. Peace-keeping. 2. Religious Toleration. 3. Universal Suffrage. 4. Welcoming Immigrants. 5. Diffusion of Well-being. By contribution No. 1, is meant "the advance made in the United States, not in theory only, but in practice, toward the abandonment of war as the means of settling disputes between nations, the substitution of discussion and arbitration, and the avoidance of armaments."

In view of recent events, it may be well to inquire: Are we keeping up our contributions to civilization? Two episodes of portentous significance have occurred at the end of this century, the Spanish War in the new world and "l'affaire" in the old world. If our army, let us hope, is free from such military types as Mercier, Roget and Boisdeffre, our internal affairs are by no means free from the Crokers, the Quays, and the Gormans, and there is little to choose between a military dictator before whom the soldiers bow down, and a political boss who commands the obedient voters. On the other hand, with such types, though few, as are represented by the Zolas and the Picquarts, we recognize the fact that moral sense does exist, and that not everything is going to the bad. They are the Nortons and the Hoars of the republic.

Love is described by a well-known preacher as "the greatest thing in the world." One of its prime ingredients is sincerity, — the supreme good, "which rejoiceth not in iniquity but in truth." Indeed, truth is the pedestal upon which all this loveliness stands. Then let our plain endeavor be to see the truth, and in doing so, let us with Goethe ever seek for "light, more light."